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Education and opportunity: Is the UK departing from a common tradition?

*Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture
read 18 March 2014*

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Abstract: There is an assumption in public debate that Scotland and England are drifting apart in social policy, whatever the outcome of the referendum in Scotland in September 2014 on whether Scotland should become an independent country. Three broad examples of policy divergence in education are discussed to examine the claim—in connection with student finance in higher education, with the structure of secondary education, and with the school curriculum. It is concluded that the apparent divergence owes more to rhetoric than to the reality of policy, of public attitudes or of social experience. Despite the origins of a shared educational philosophy in the post-war welfare state, and despite the partisan strife of current politics, a weakening of that state through greater Scottish autonomy does not in itself signal an end to the project of common welfare.

Keywords: Education, welfare state, universalism, Scotland, England, curriculum, student finance, school governance.

INTRODUCTION

It has become the common-sense view of public debate recently that devolution has made the UK less united even well in advance of the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014. *The Economist*, in November 2013, said that ‘even if Scotland votes to stay in the United Kingdom, the union is fraying’. Devolution had already disrupted the common social experience of the UK so profoundly that this process ‘appears not just irreversible but unstoppable’. Steve Richards, in the *Guardian*, in August 2013, made a similar point, having spent a few days at the Edinburgh Festival:

there may be no divorce [in the referendum], but devolution combined with a right-wing Westminster government is moving our nations in separate directions. . . . In its political culture and its powers to define what form that culture takes, Scotland is already so incomparably different from England that a form of separation is taking place in front of our eyes. (Richards 2013)

Talking to a mixed audience of English and Scots, he said, was now like addressing a mixture of ‘Americans and Swedes’.

The Scottish journalist Iain Macwhirter has summed up what he sees as the implications for the very nature of the state and society:

England is dismantling the traditional welfare state through marketisation of the NHS, welfare caps and free schools, while Scotland retains faith in the monolithic health service, social security and universal comprehensive education. (Macwhirter 2013)

If Scotland were to become independent, he went on, it would be likely to ‘evolve into a relatively high-tax, high-spend oil-rich Nordic state within the European Union, emulating Denmark or Finland. England may seek its own form of independence, probably leaving the EU to become a finance-led market economy with low taxation and diminished social protections.’

Such perceptions that Scotland is already profoundly different contribute sharply to the debate about Scottish independence, although the political disputes in Scotland itself tend to be about what the most appropriate version of a left-wing response should be to such divergence, since the main partisan conflict is between two large left-of-centre parties, the Scottish National Party and the Labour Party (What Scotland Thinks website 2014). Reflections on a common British welfare state have underpinned the most sociologically well-informed of the contributions from both sides of that debate, politicians asking whether the shared project of a common welfare state is any longer viable. Opponents of independence, notably the former UK Labour prime minister Gordon Brown, regret this loss of common purpose. In a speech in summer 2012, Mr Brown celebrated what he called ‘a community of values that cuts right across the United Kingdom’, and said that this shared commitment would be lost if Scotland votes to ‘break up the Union’ (Brown 2012, developed more fully by Brown 2014). Supporters of independence, by contrast, argue that the only way to recover the old welfare-state ethic is to make Scotland diverge even further from England. For example, the deputy first minister of Scotland, the SNP politician Nicola Sturgeon, said, in 2012, that ‘the creation of the welfare state played an overwhelming role in giving the union a new purpose,’ replacing the empire that had created a union out of disparate nations: ‘Britain lost the colony of India, but we all gained a new territory in the shape of free health care and social protection from cradle to grave. Alongside the BBC, these things began to define Britishness’ (Sturgeon

2012). These shared institutions, she said, had now been so much undermined by what she referred to as ‘the Westminster system of government’ that Scotland could retain them only by becoming politically independent. Thus it was not Scotland that was breaking away from the old Britishness but rather governments in London.

There is some irony here, to which we shall return, since essentially what Ms Sturgeon and others are arguing is that to retain what might be characterised as British values of the past it is necessary for Scotland to break away from the Britain of the present. Indeed both Mr Brown and Ms Sturgeon argue that these values of the past—the shared values of common welfare—are also values for the future. They differ profoundly only on the constitutional framework that might translate these values into policy.

So the claim discussed in this paper is that the common project of the British welfare state is coming to an end, and that devolution and possible Scottish independence are part of this erosion. Constitutional disintegration is not the only way in which the old welfare-state settlement has been undermined. There are many other ways in which common welfare and common citizenship seem to be treated now with some scepticism by the UK state—targeted benefits, growing inequality, social polarisation, withdrawal of the state from responsibility to be replaced by private responsibility (Taylor-Gooby 2012). But the overarching guarantor of a common citizenship achieved through common welfare was a state possessed in common throughout Britain. Therefore if that weakens or ends, so—it is claimed—do the projects of common social citizenship. In particular for this paper, education and common educational opportunities were at the heart of this project of common welfare, in Britain as elsewhere. If educational practices depart too far from common principles, then education not only ceases to be a foundation of common social citizenship, but in fact becomes a source of differentiation. If young people in Scotland and in England are inducted into a different kind of society, then education itself becomes a further source of divergence.

The paper is in three parts. It starts by looking at some examples of educational policy in more detail. Then it considers how we might understand what is meant by saying that the welfare state rested on common traditions, and considers academic rather than journalistic evidence relating to the question of whether the common traditions are being eroded. It finishes by reconsidering the educational debates in the light of that evidence, and drawing some general conclusions about the relationship between political autonomy and social distinctiveness.

THREE EDUCATIONAL EXAMPLES

Three examples from education will illustrate the apparent divergence more clearly, in detail. They also show that, if there is divergence, it is largely not because of anything

which Scotland (or Wales) has done but because of radical change in policy for England. In that sense, these examples would appear to confirm the Scottish nationalist claim that it is England or the UK state which has departed from the British values of the past. The three educational examples concern student finance in higher education, the structure of secondary schooling, and—perhaps most fundamentally of all—the school curriculum.

Student finance in higher education

The question of the ways in which the cost of taking a higher-education course is paid for is the best-known example of all the policy difference between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Crudely put, it is usually summed up as something like this: ‘students from Scotland at Scottish universities don’t pay fees while those from the rest of the UK do pay fees, wherever they go to university’. In more detail, but still glossing over many of the complications in order to concentrate on the essential political points, the background may be summarised quite straightforwardly (Barr 2012; Barr and Johnston 2010; Dearden, Goodman and Wyness 2012; Wakeling and Jefferies 2013). Following the Dearing review of higher education which reported in 1997, the Labour government introduced fees and ended grants. That was a radical departure from the policy which had been in place since the introduction of state grants for students in higher education in 1962. The new financial arrangement then became controversial during the first elections to the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Although Labour was the largest party there, the proportional electoral system led to there being a majority in the parliament against the new arrangements, and so Labour was forced to concede a further review of student finance as part of its negotiations with the Liberal Democrats to form a coalition government in Scotland.

The result in Scotland was in effect a graduate tax—a loan to cover fees that was repayable after graduation at a rate related to salary. This applied to students domiciled in Scotland at Scottish universities, and to rest-of-EU students because EU rules prevent Scottish universities’ treating students from other member states differently from home students. But the new arrangements did not apply to students from the rest of the UK. It was thus Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal Democrats—not the nationalists—who inaugurated the different treatment of citizens of the same state. But the nationalists have not demurred.

The essential differences in student finance between Scotland and the rest of the UK have remained broadly the same ever since, through various further changes in England and Wales—the capping of fees for Welsh-domiciled students in Wales in 2007, the UK Labour government’s increasing fees after 2006 in England, but their

replacement by the same kind of postgraduate tax-like repayment as in Scotland, and the UK coalition government's removal of the cap on fees in England from 2012 along with their introduction of a new system of bursaries and of repayment methods that the Liberal Democrats forced on their Conservative partners and that made the English arrangements now more redistributive than Labour's regime before 2010, and more redistributive than the arrangements in Scotland (Chowdry *et al.* 2012). Whatever the complexities, the essence of the contrasts are not changed: Scottish students don't pay, Welsh students don't pay very much, and English students pay a lot.

One reason why this policy is the most visible of all the post-devolution divergence is cross-border flows of students, so that in university classes now in Scotland there are students paying nothing and students paying a great deal. Of course that has always been so, and is true also elsewhere in the UK, insofar as students from outside the European Union are charged very large fees, but the difference here is that the divergence is between citizens of the same state. The contrast is also symbolically exacerbated in Scotland by the fact that citizens from other EU states do not pay fees and so are now treated differently from citizens of the rest of the UK. That is another irony in the context of the referendum of 2014, since independence would force the same free treatment of students from the residual UK, which would then be a separate member state.

Whatever the complexities, this difference has now become so entrenched that the Scottish First Minister has famously said in a flight of Burnsian rhetoric in 2011 that the rocks would melt with the sun before he would preside over the introduction of fees for undergraduate higher education in Scotland (BBC 2011).

Structure of secondary schooling

The second example of educational divergence within the UK also stems from an innovation in English policy: the introduction of greater diversity in secondary schooling. This diversity is a departure in England from the system of common secondary schooling that was generally the outcome in all three British countries that stemmed from the 1960s moves to non-selective secondary schools in the public sector. This had never gone quite as far in England as in Wales or Scotland, insofar as some areas of England retained selective schools, and also insofar as the independent sector remained larger in England than in Scotland or Wales, and therefore offered more competition to public sector schools. But the deliberate creation of diversity in school provision in England that was started by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major was given a strong impetus under the Blair government, and has become the most visible education policy of the present UK government, articulated

energetically and eloquently by the former Education Secretary Michael Gove. The stark contrast is then with both Wales and Scotland, which have done absolutely none of this. Scotland and Wales have still essentially a common structure of comprehensive, non-selective secondary schools, not diversified in any way, with only small independent sectors alongside them.

The diversity of provision introduced by the Conservatives in the 1990s in England was limited essentially to the City Technology Colleges that were intended to strengthen technical education, in partnership with commercial finance, and these did not get very far because of a reluctance by both business and local government to develop them (Hatcher 2011; Machin & Veroit 2011). The Conservatives responded by trying to develop specialist secondary schools which Labour embraced with enthusiasm. By the end of its first term in office, in 2001, around 20 per cent of English secondaries had become specialist, and in April of that year, during the general election campaign, Tony Blair said that there would be no limit on the number (Paterson 2003). Now almost all secondary schools in England have a specialism (West & Bailey 2013: 148).

The development of academy schools outside the local authority sector was an even stronger challenge to the previous uniformity of provision. They were described by the Department for Education and Employment in 2000 as 'part of a wider programme to extend diversity within the state sector' which were related to new forms of governance, 'allowing new schools to be established within the state sector, . . . allowing existing private schools to become part of the publicly-provided education system, . . . [and] allowing new promoters from the voluntary, religious or business sectors to take over weak schools or replace them with City Academies' (quoted by Hatcher 2011: 486). That policy already took the structure of secondary schooling in quite different directions from those in Scotland and Wales.

Michael Gove's policy of 'free schools' went even more radically in that same direction (Hatcher 2011). These are publicly funded schools that are not managed by the local authority and that are in principle almost as free from central control as independent schools: they are not required to follow the national curriculum, may decide (within limits) which pupils to admit, and are not bound by national standards of staffing. Mr Gove borrowed the ideas from Sweden, where somewhat similar schools were enabled during a brief period in the mid-1990s of a government led by conservative parties; that reform in Sweden was not rescinded by the social democrats when they came back to power (Lindbom 2001; Lidström 1999).

This whole programme of radical diversity of schools in England has been criticised by writers on the left as the end of the ideals of common educational provision that were the founding ideas of common schooling. For example, Beck described Mr Gove as holding 'a profoundly anti-statist ideology, that includes an attempt to complete Margaret Thatcher's work of radically marginalising any local government

presence in education'. The programme, Beck argues, 'aims . . . to create a new "common sense" that uncritically accepts that neoliberal modes of governing are natural . . . or inevitable in the modern world' (Beck 2012: 9, 11).

So the apparently sharp divide between policy for the structure of secondary schooling in England on the one hand and policy in Scotland and Wales on the other seems, as with the question of university student fees, to bring the common principles of the original welfare state to an end.

School curriculum

Despite all the controversy surrounding secondary-school structures and higher education fees, perhaps the deepest changes are happening in connection with what is being taught in schools, and these certainly lead to the appearance of the sharpest philosophical disagreements between the direction of education policy in Scotland and that in England. On the whole, this is an area where the differences only really became significant when Michael Gove became Education Secretary.

Mr Gove was determined to distance himself from all recent curriculum policy in England, and was determined to restore what he sees as a traditional curriculum based on subjects and on rigour. He said in 2010, for example, that 'the great tradition of our literature—Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy—should be at the heart of school life'. In 2008, before becoming a minister, he described this approach as based on the emancipating power of knowledge:

knowledge is the mother, father and midwife of understanding—totally indispensable. For those who grow up in homes rich in knowledge, where conversation is laced with learning and childhood curiosity is easily satisfied, future learning is made easier, deeper understanding comes more readily. . . . [W]ith the abandonment of subject disciplines, the poorer lose out again. (Gove 2008: 24)

He described the pedagogical philosophy that he rejects as 'Progressivism, or Constructivism or Child-Centred Education,' 'championed [he adds] in different ways, with different emphases, at different times, by John Dewey, by Jean Piaget, by Lady Plowden and by successive Department of Education luminaries'. 'What has united the followers of this ideology,' he argued, was 'hostility towards traditional, academic, fact-rich, knowledge-centred, subject-based, teacher-led education' (Gove 2008: 20).

That signals a radical departure, but what makes Mr Gove's reforms particularly relevant to the debate here is that policy on the curriculum in Scotland is moving in quite the opposite direction from Mr Gove's favouring of a traditional curriculum. There is almost complete consensus on this in Scotland across the political spectrum, and embracing most shades of professional opinion and of opinion among academic

commentators (Paterson 2014; Priestley & Humes 2010). The Scottish reforms are called the ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, and the general principles are described officially as entailing that ‘the child or young person is at the centre of learning provision’ (Scottish Government 2008: 22). The aim is not directly to instil knowledge: ‘the purpose of the curriculum is to enable the child or young person to develop the “four capacities”’, by which are meant becoming ‘successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors’. The curriculum framework ‘sets out what a child or young person should be able to do and the experiences that contribute to their learning, rather than detailed definitions of content or prescribed hours of study’ (Scottish Government 2008: 5).

Priestley & Humes (2010: 355) describe the Scottish approach as ‘a process curriculum’, characterised by aiming for ‘individual growth and intrinsic purposes’, as opposed to purposes set by, for example, the nature of knowledge or the needs of the economy. Michael Young—doyen of curriculum studies in England—draws the explicit comparison between this and what is happening in England. In the emerging Scottish approach, he says, ‘the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning and the distinctiveness of the pedagogic relationship between teachers and pupils in providing students with access to specialist knowledge is played down’. This is, Young adds, ‘what Gove and his colleagues see themselves as combating; hence his enthusiasm for returning to the past’ (Young 2011: 268).

Not surprisingly, in the light of this, Mr Gove fell out spectacularly with the dominant academic opinion in England. Young, commenting further on the constructivist philosophy underlying Curriculum for Excellence, makes the point in explicitly political terms: ‘with its emphasis on access and participation,’ he says, ‘and its confidence in claiming that no form of knowledge is necessarily more reliable than any other, it appears progressive and democratic and has been seen as attractive, in its less extreme forms, on the Left and among some researchers in educational studies’ (Young 2011: 269). Implicitly following such a line in their criticism of Mr Gove, 100 education academics wrote a letter to *The Independent* newspaper in 2013 alleging that the new English ‘curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children’s ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity’ (*The Independent* 20 March 2013). Mr Gove responded with his characteristic sarcasm, describing the signatories as criticising ‘the [UK Government] Coalition for our indefensibly reactionary drive to get more children to spell properly, use a wider vocabulary and learn their times tables’ (Gove 2013). The rudeness of that had previously been prefigured by an equally *ad hominem* attack from one of Mr Gove’s many academic critics on the left, the philosopher John White: ‘we know [that Mr Gove] adored the traditional fare he got at his Aberdeen grammar school, but only an education minister one tree short of an arboretum would impose a personal preference on a whole nation’ (White 2011).

We shall return to this, since White gets his history of Scottish education wrong, but the serious point amidst the political bluster is the philosophical difference between (to put it too starkly) a knowledge-centred and a child-centred curriculum, between Matthew Arnold's view of liberal education as passing on the best that has been thought and said—a view praised by Mr Gove—and John Dewey's view that shifting the curriculum's centre of attention from the teacher to the child was as profound a change in its own way as that brought about by Copernicus (Dewey 1915: 35). If devolution has enabled such sharp differences to emerge between these two neighbouring systems of education, then surely—it might reasonably be supposed—it has destroyed the once common educational project of the welfare state.

WELFARE STATE AND COMMON TRADITIONS

That, then, is the evidence for disintegration of policy in education. How now might we understand the claim that devolution is threatening the very foundation of the welfare state? The premises here are that the British idea of social citizenship rested on common traditions of social thought, and that education was the heart of that. These premises are indeed plausible. There are two strands to this, both directly related to the nature of the education systems: the first aspect is a universal structure of opportunity; the second is a certain kind of universalism of learning.

The structure of opportunity

In a report published in 1947, the Scottish Advisory Council on Education commended what later came to be called comprehensive education but which in those days in Scotland was usually referred to as the omnibus school: 'the case for the omnibus school is that this is the natural way for a democracy to order the post-primary education of a given area' (Scottish Education Department 1947: 36). Among the civic advantages which the Council saw was the manner in which a school educating the whole community could contribute to 'inculcating the community virtues'.

A belief that providing a common set of opportunities would create a democratic culture was then one of the several reasons why a pattern of common secondary schooling came to be the preferred mode of secondary-school organisation throughout Britain by the 1960s. Anthony Crosland, for example, argued in 1956 in *The Future of Socialism* that 'if the state provides schools and hospitals, teachers and doctors, on a generous scale and of a really high quality . . . then the result will be, not indeed a greater equality of real incomes, but certainly a greater equality in manners and the texture of social life' (Crosland 1956: 85). In particular, he argued later, comprehensive schooling ought to be justified 'in terms of a sense of community, of social

cohesion, of a nation composed of people who understand each other because they can communicate' (Crosland 1974: 204).

These are the local political expressions of a principle that has been described by Boli *et al.* (1985) as universalistic individualism. It was about individual opportunity, but was universal in that it sought to make a reality of the liberal claim that everyone is equal. There are three aspects of the way in which this rested on a shared British state. First, as in many other places, the state expanded education, and achieved new political legitimacy in the era of mass democracy by doing so. Second, educational growth strengthened nation building, again as elsewhere but with the complication in Britain that it involved three distinct nations nested within a larger one. Thus through sanctioning the democratisation of education systems that remained distinctive in the separate parts of Britain, the newly democratic British state found a new way of showing British identity to be complementary to the other national identities, not antagonistic to them. Then the third role for education underpinning universalistic individualism is an overarching liberalism. Mass education has been the link between politics and the individual in the very construction and definition of what Ramirez and Boli (1987: 10) call 'the European model of a national society'. The British state, then (to paraphrase these authors) was the guardian of all the nations that constitute Britain by being a guarantor of individual progress through education.

Individual opportunity, the argument goes, evoked a common British identity because it was believed that the opportunity depended on the welfare project of the British state, depended, that is, on the universalism which the very concept of 'Britain' seemed then—till about the 1960s—still to embody. So if the structure of opportunity is no longer essentially the same throughout Britain, then one of the pillars of the British welfare state is weakened.

Universalism of learning

These common opportunities were not only about structures, however. They were also about what is learnt, about the common culture which a common education system was supposed to bring about. That view was recurrent and strong among those people whose influence led throughout the first half of the 20th century to the fully developed welfare state of the post-war period—indeed was strong earlier than the belief in common structures of opportunity, which was not widely held on the political left until the 1950s with thinkers such as Crosland.

Harold Laski—socialist intellectual and professor at the London School of Economics—wrote in 1923, for example, that 'we have made the electorate commensurate with the majority of the adult population, but we have failed, in any creative sense, to fit that electorate to grasp either its responsibilities or its powers', which

would require that the average person ‘be trained to feel a moral responsibility for the results of the political process’ (Laski 1923: 50). To that end, the most effective means was immersion in a tradition:

for what, in the handling of material, it is essential for the student to encounter is the great mind which has formed the civilised tradition. He will rarely find it easy to wrestle with; but he will gain infinitely more from surmounting the difficulties of the supreme book than by digesting a second-hand summary of what the supreme book contains. (Laski 1930: 97)

Percy Nunn, the influential professor of education at the Institute of Education in London, noted in 1920 that ‘the strongest opponents of vocational training are among those who speak for labour,’ and explained this by their ‘claim for the poor the heritage of culture from which they have so long been unjustly excluded’ (Nunn 1920: 204). R.H. Tawney, admirer of Nunn and the person with greatest claim to have shaped Labour’s education policy as it moved towards consolidating and extending the welfare state, argued that ‘no one can be fully at home in the world’ without acquaintance with the cultural traditions of society, in which he included ‘literature and art, the history of society and the revelations of science’ (Tawney 1964 [1953]: 88). James Chuter Ede, the Labour MP who spoke for the party on education in the 1930s, who was co-author (with the Conservative Minister of Education, R.A. Butler) of the wartime coalition’s Education Act of 1944, and who was Home Secretary in the 1945 Labour Government, wrote in 1929 that

if we are to have a democracy capable of shouldering th[e] great burden [of responsibility for decisions that used to be relegated to the few], I am quite sure that it can only be done through giving to the children of all classes of the community a greater opportunity of entering into those great heritages of literature, of art and of beauty that should enrich the lives of the community. (Quoted by Barker 1972: 139–40)

The culture which all these reforming political thinkers admired was not a particular culture, not a class culture or any other kind of sectional culture. There was no inkling of relativism among the social democratic and liberal reformers who created the welfare state, absolutely no sense that the best that has been thought and said was anything other than the basis of the first truly common culture to be created deliberately through education. The inherited intellectual culture, they believed, could provide all the ideas needed to reform capitalist society even in the most fundamental ways.

To sum up the delicate balance that was sought between tradition and change, consider A.D. Lindsay, founder (in 1949–51) of the innovatory University of Keele, philosopher, socialist, political activist, and in 1938 anti-appeasement parliamentary candidate in a by-election in Oxford (which he nearly won)—yet steeped in the past,

in the traditions of Scottish religious thought, as Master of Balliol, and as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford. Lindsay said that ‘the problem [is] this conception of a standard which was corrigible and progressive, creative and authoritative’ (Lindsay 1950: 145). So the socialist and philosopher—and Scot—Lindsay sought radical inspiration in the tradition of English poetry just as surely as Mr Gove does today:

an understanding and appreciation of English poetry, of its history and its relations to the history of English culture, is a far more effective way of teaching a common outlook on the world, and a common understanding of our heritage, than a technical instruction in Philosophy. (Scott 1971: 370)

These founders of the idea of the welfare state were all then of Matthew Arnold’s view that people ‘of culture are the true apostles of equality,’ that ‘the best that has been thought and said’ would enable us—in the often forgotten second half of that sentence—‘through this knowledge [to turn] a stream of fresh and free thought on our stock notions and habits’ (Arnold 1960 [1869]: 6). So to undermine a common culture in whatever way—to define the common curriculum in such a radically different way as is now happening between Scotland and England—is to destroy a common heritage, a belief in which lay at the heart of the development of universal education in the middle of the 20th century.

THE COUNTER ARGUMENT

Yet there is a paradox in all this legacy of social democratic thinking. The common culture in which these old socialists believed is very similar to the common culture that the radical Tory Michael Gove wanted to introduce in England. Should that particular point about one of these policy differences not at least give us pause for thought? Might the differences of policy that we have noticed not be in fact really variations on common themes, the differences exaggerated by the rhetoric of politics, and mistaken for profound change (by too credulous journalistic and some academic commentators)? Might the difference be about means rather than ends, and indeed might these differences of means be not much greater now than they have often been in the pre-devolutionary past, when Scotland already had, through administrative autonomy, distinctive universities, and a pattern of secondary schooling that was somewhat more comprehensive than that in England?

One of the striking features of the whole constitutional debate about Scotland’s place in Britain is how little public values differ between Scotland and the rest of Britain. Take for example what the British Social Attitudes Survey tells us about attitudes to the

welfare state. In 2010, the proportions agreeing that the government should redistribute wealth were 41 per cent in Scotland and 34 per cent in England:¹ a difference, true, but hardly great enough, one would have thought, to undermine the very structure of the state, and only a minority in favour of redistribution in each country.

The same is the case with other topics. The proportion hostile to the welfare state on the grounds that it weakens communities—in the sense of believing that the welfare state discourages people from helping each other—was 29 per cent in Scotland and 40 per cent in England, a difference again, certainly, but in both countries a minority.² The proportion not very sympathetic to the unemployed—in the sense of believing that they could find work if they tried—was around one half in each country: lower in Scotland (at 46 per cent) than in England (55 per cent) but again not qualitatively different.³ The proportion nevertheless looking back with some pride on the welfare state, and agreeing that it was one of Britain's proudest achievements, was almost identical: 49 per cent in Scotland and 52 per cent in England.⁴ These differences, though generally placing Scotland on average to the left of England, are not so huge as to signal a fundamental gulf of social values.

We can see this all the more clearly if we look at some measures of attitudes towards democracy and the state across Europe, as recorded by the European Social Survey.⁵ In 2012, that Survey found that the proportion believing that democracy in their state worked well was 86 per cent in the UK, almost identical in England (where it was 87 per cent) and Scotland (where it was 84 per cent).⁶ By contrast, the range across Europe was from the mid-90s in the Scandinavian states, and around 90 per cent in Germany and the Netherlands, through 70 per cent in Spain, to 54 per cent in Russia. Thus Scotland and England were both near the top end of this scale.

In the 2004 European Social Survey, the percentage believing that state benefits could create a more equal society was 45 per cent in Scotland and 41 per cent in England, but the range was far wider elsewhere: from around 66 per cent in Scandinavia, through about the same in Germany as in Britain, to 32 per cent in the Czech Republic and 14 per cent in Hungary.⁷ We shall look at some other more specifically educational attitudes below, but the main point to make here is that, though there is some

¹ BSAS 2010 data set from UK Data Service, Study Number 6969. Variable REDISTRB. Percentages are weighted; unweighted sample sizes are 273 (Scotland) and 2,360 (England).

² See above, n. 1. Variable WELFHELP.

³ See above, n. 1. Variable UNEMPJOB.

⁴ See above, n. 1. Variable PROUDWLF.

⁵ Data from European Social Survey web site, <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/>.

⁶ Variable DMCNTOV, percentage scoring 5–10 on a 10-point scale. Percentages are weighted; unweighted sample sizes are 173 (Scotland) and 1,515 (England). Sample sizes in other countries were between about 1,800 and 2,200.

⁷ See above, nn. 5 and 6. Variable SBEQSOC.

basis for the political claim that Scotland is to the left of England, the differences are not so great as to indicate a profound territorial rupture in social values.

More generally, we still live essentially in the world of the Enlightenment. Throughout Europe, what purport to be national values are actually just the local translation of what Joppke calls ‘the universal creed of liberty and equality that marks all liberal societies . . . the universal, nationally anonymous creed of the liberal state’ (Joppke 2004: 253–4). All that differs is language and accent: ‘the various national labels are only different names for the same thing, the liberal creed of liberty and equality’. Thus in the European Social Survey we find general agreement on some basic principles of liberal society. For example, there is very clear majority agreement in 2012 with the propositions that ‘people should be treated equally’ and have ‘equal opportunities in life’—between about 66 and 80 per cent agreeing in almost all countries.⁸ Even stronger is the agreement that it is important ‘to live in a country that is governed democratically’—almost all countries have agreement proportions between 90 and 95 per cent.⁹ Both Scotland and England share in this common European liberalism.

If part of these common values is what is referred to as globalisation—the penetration of the free market everywhere—then that is not new either. Liberalism has always been both emancipatory and potentially oppressive because standardising, and education in the service of liberal universalism can seem to the particularist to be what the Irish nationalist Pádraig Pearse called an imperial ‘murder machine’ (Lyons 1973: 652). Consider John Stuart Mill—great Victorian liberal, hero of the left ever since, admired everywhere still today for his pioneering concern with human rights, notably the rights of women. Consider how Mill expressed the claims of liberal modernity rather unashamedly, writing in 1861:

nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilized and cultivated people—to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity and prestige of French power—than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander as members of the British nation. (Mill 1861: chap. 16)

We might note, too, that statistical measurement and therefore educational research are themselves part of this standardisation, implying—in the words of Theodore

⁸ See above, nn. 5 and 6. Variable IPEQOPT.

⁹ See above, nn. 5 and 6. Variable LVDTC.

Porter—‘the subordination of personal interests and prejudices to public standards’ (Porter 1995: 74). Using statistics to create norms conflates the idea of normal as a criterion with normal as a description of a state of affairs: ‘the normal’, in a comment by Ian Hacking about Comte, ‘as existing average [and] as figure of perfection to which we may progress’ (Hacking 1990: 168). Originally—in the period of 19th-century development of statistics about which Porter and Hacking were writing—statistical standardisation was a national project, but it is now much more than that. As Grek has noted in connection with the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment, ‘evaluations of national education and training systems require international points of comparison,’ which—as she points out—is a transfer to the international level of the standardisation which the very invention of statistics as an agency of the state originally brought about internally: ‘statistics and numbers which elide the local are . . . important to the construction . . . of a commensurable education policy field’ (Grek 2009: 25).

We might then ask whether the three examples that we looked at of education policy within the UK are in fact as straightforwardly to be interpreted as evidence of radical divergence as may have appeared plausible. On the question first of student finance, if we take the point of comparison to be opportunity rather than mechanisms of opportunity, the conclusion from careful research is that the differences in the regimes of fees and of student support have no effect on the outcomes, and thus no effect on the deeper matter of opportunities or denial of opportunities. Nicholas Barr, for example, has noted that ‘a widespread and central argument was that variable fees would deter students from poorer backgrounds, making higher education even more the province of the rich’. But, he notes (from UCAS data), ‘that has not happened’. There is no evidence that the much-noticed difference in student finance between Scotland and England has led to any differences in social-class inequality of access: thus between 2002 and 2008, as Barr points out, ‘applications in England [from] the bottom three socioeconomic groups rose by 6.5 per cent [annually], compared with 0.5 per cent in Scotland, 3.1 per cent in Northern Ireland and 3.7 per cent in Wales (Barr 2010: 14, 17). Though the differences of student finance are greater than at any time since 1962, they were much larger in the interwar period, at a time when the Union was far more secure than it is today: grants from the Carnegie Trust enabled many able young Scots of limited means to attend university when their counterparts in England had only very restricted access to bursaries of any kind (Anderson 2006: 92 and 118).

Despite the changes brought about by the Scottish Parliament, there is little difference in public attitudes on this matter. The level of support for means-tested fees is similar in Scotland and in England: in the 2010 British Social Attitudes Survey, it was 63 per cent in Scotland and 70 per cent in England, and indeed Scotland became

slightly less favourable to the current Scottish policy in the decade following its introduction: in 2000, 57 per cent favoured means-tested fees (thus 6 points higher in 2010).¹⁰ More directly relevant to the underlying principles of opportunity is the quite close agreement between opinion in Scotland and opinion in England on whether opportunities to enter higher education should be expanded: in 2010, 43 per cent in Scotland, 35 per cent in England, each similar to 2004 and about five points less than in 1999.¹¹ This difference between Scotland and England is again a difference of degree rather than of fundamental social ethos.

On the structure of secondary schooling, the effect on opportunity is not in fact the major factor that it was once thought to be. On the whole, the structure of a school system—even the presence or absence of selection—seems to make little difference to outcomes, whether these are achievement in examinations, social mobility, or civic values (Boliver & Swift 2011; Kerckhoff *et al.* 1996; Paterson 2013). Comprehensive education neither raises nor harms attainment when compared to selective school systems; neither makes people more civic-minded nor diminishes their engagement with society.

Again, research on school structures contributes to the common fundamental principles, as with the international statistical comparison of nominally independent countries. Even where radically different structures are being introduced, the criteria used to evaluate them—for example the evaluation of academies in England by Machin & Vernoit (2011)—are the same as for comprehensive schools, and the same as they have been since, say, A.H. Halsey or J.W.B. Douglas and colleagues carried out their research on the operation of the old selective school system in the 1950s (for example, Douglas *et al.* 1966; Floud & Halsey 1957). Implicit in this common framework of analysis is a common epistemological framework, and therefore also a common ethical framework. Thus when the critics of English academies question whether Machin & Vernoit have adequately controlled for selection bias, they are accepting in principle that such schools are part of the same framework of understanding as any other kind of school. To engage in this debate at all on statistical grounds is to accept that the variation in policy—radical though it may be—is taking place on top of a ground of agreement about the importance of opportunity, and about how to measure it. Political debate implicitly rests on that common ground too. When a politician says that ‘education [i]s the only reliable means of realising a young person’s potential’ or ‘education is the key to social mobility’, or ‘schools should be engines of social

¹⁰ For 2010, see above, n. 1; variable HEDFEE. British Social Attitudes Survey 2000 has UK Data Service Study Number 4486.

¹¹ For 2010, see above, n. 1; variable HEDOPP. British Social Attitudes Survey 2004 has UK Data Service Study Number 5329, and 1999 has Study Number 4318.

mobility', there is no clue within the rhetoric as to which side of the debate that person is on, nor indeed as to whether they are speaking about Scotland or England.¹²

Any differences in public views about school structures go back to before the Scottish Parliament was created in 1999: if the stronger support for comprehensive education in Scotland than in England contributes to the fragility of the Union, then it is not to be attributed to devolution, but developed in the 1980s (for example, see Brown *et al.* (1999: 96–107), using the British Election Surveys of 1997, 1979 and 1974). Moreover, on most matters attitudes concerning school structures are little more favourable in England than in Scotland to private firms or charities running schools. In the 2007 British Social Attitudes Survey, the proportion in favour of private companies running schools was 17 per cent in Scotland and 20 per cent in England. For charities running schools, the proportion in favour was 30 per cent in Scotland and 37 per cent in England.¹³ There is not much evidence here of fundamental divergence between Scotland and England so far as the ways in which schools relate to society politically are concerned.

Then on the curriculum we are back to the irony that we have already briefly seen, that Mr Gove is closer to the dominant tradition of liberal education than his critics, and thus closer also to his left-wing critics' predecessors half a century or more ago than they are. He does indeed—as we noted John White saying—conscientiously draw upon his own school experience in Aberdeen, but Mr Gove's critics on the political left rather neglect the social purpose to which that old Scottish academic curriculum was put. In the words of Guy Neave, writing around the time when Mr Gove was at school:

in most Western countries the distinction between 'academic' and non academic courses is regarded as one of the major historic obstacles to a democratic system of education. In Scotland, the reverse is true. The concept of a curriculum dominated by a highly academic content has been justified in the name of creating a 'common course' for all. (Neave 1976: 131)

In truth then, the apparent contrast in the cultural meaning of different approaches to the curriculum is less significant than that there are multiple interpretations of a common tradition. The Scottish tradition which Neave notes, and to which such a pre-eminently British academic leader as A.D. Lindsay was heir in the first half of the 20th century, was part of a common current of ideas about liberal education that, in both England and Scotland, owed its main debt to Matthew Arnold and, further

¹²The two social mobility quotations are respectively from Tristram Hunt (28 Oct 2013) and Michael Gove (Department for Education, 2010: 6); Hunt speaks for Labour on education in England. The one about realising potential is from Michael Russell (27 March 2013), Cabinet Secretary for Education in the Scottish Government.

¹³BSAS 2007 data set from UK Data Service, Study Number 6240. Variables SCHPRV and SCHVOL. Percentages are weighted; unweighted sample sizes are 189 (Scotland) and 1,741 (England).

back, to the classical tradition as renovated from the Renaissance onwards (Rothblatt, 2007). Variation in how that tradition was interpreted was about means, not ends, as it is still today. Being part of this liberal tradition, too, Mr Gove is not the reactionary traditionalist that his critics allege: as Michael Young has pointed out, ‘Gove has claimed that his approach is based on the principle of equality. In the sense that he is proposing a common “curriculum for all” he is right’ (Young 2011: 275). Young continues: ‘to the extent that a subject-based curriculum is based on concepts, not facts alone, it is not only a reproducer of inequalities, but also potentially a carrier of universal knowledge—knowledge that is not dependent for its validity on its social origins or when or how it was produced’ (Young 2011: 276). There would probably be nothing there with which Mr Gove would disagree, and undoubtedly he has repeatedly acknowledged the importance of concepts built on a secure foundation of knowledge about facts, and has never said that all he wants is facts. He wrote in 2008 on the relationship of knowledge to ideas that ‘we learn by using existing knowledge to construct models, parallels, paradigms and analogies which enable us to grasp new concepts and insights’ (Gove 2008: 24). But, as Young’s comments here exemplify, some of Mr Gove’s critics are not the unthinking ideologues that he alleges, and some of them remember the history of left-wing support for a liberal education as the welfare state was being established.

More to the point for our present discussion, the new Scottish curriculum is perhaps better thought of as a reform of pedagogical methods than necessarily an abandonment of knowledge or of the traditions of intellectual enquiry. Alongside the constructivist ideas which we noted as tending to break down inherited structures of knowledge, the Curriculum for Excellence principles also include judgements such as this commendation of disciplinary knowledge:

subjects are an essential feature of the curriculum, particularly in secondary school. They provide an important and familiar structure for knowledge, offering a context for specialists to inspire, stretch and motivate. (Scottish Government 2008: 20)

The old predilection for the academic curriculum in Scotland will not vanish by ministerial fiat, and what actually will happen in Scotland will thus depend on practice, on the ‘specialists’ cited but not explained in that quotation. Trusting the teachers, which Curriculum for Excellence does, must mean also trusting those who choose an approach to knowledge as traditional as Mr Gove’s.

So the Scottish approach allows for Mr Gove’s, just as it is a caricature to reduce his ideas to a mechanical philistinism. Both approaches are really elements of the always evolving tradition of liberal education. As Sheldon Rothblatt once noted (1976: 199):

the phrase ‘a liberal education’ . . . enjoys an extraordinary continuity and has survived each of the revolutions that should have disposed of it. . . . The words continue to

exercise a hold on the imagination, and scarcely any educational change of significant proportions is undertaken without reference to some aspect of its history,

the common element being, in some form, the belief that ‘liberal education [is] the pathway to civilisation’ (Rothblatt 1976: 23).

CONCLUSIONS

Three points might be made in conclusion. The first is that there are far more continuities of culture, of opportunity, and of liberal ideas than the rhetoric of politics sometimes indicates (Raffe 2004). By this is meant continuities not only over space, though there are indeed greater similarities of social philosophy in the parts of Britain than is usually supposed, as we have seen. If Scotland secedes, it will not be directly because the country has a fundamentally different social philosophy from England. The continuities are also over time, and they help to consolidate the sense of a common culture. The values that led to the welfare state, and the values that underpinned a common system of education, continue to be strong. That is not because of anything specifically to do with Britishness, but rather because these values are part of the common culture of universalistic individualism that is found across the developed world.

The second point is about research. Research itself contributes to this process of standardisation, in that in order to compare social groups it has to create common categories in terms of which to compare. The only way in which we could prevent an impact from research on the maintenance of common criteria would be if we kept our results secret. So the inclination of academics to engage in public debate is itself a contribution to processes of standardisation.

The final point is that none of this really has much to say about the future of Britain as a constitutional entity. Scottish independence could happen without disturbing these commonalities, just as social values can be quite similar among Scandinavian countries, or indeed between them and other places, as we noted in passing earlier from the European Social Survey. The UK may be departing from common traditions so far as politics and specific policies are concerned—the means of social philosophy—but for the social traditions that really matter it would take much more than the ephemera of politics or even the accident of constitutional change to bring to an end the shared history of values, ideas, and principles.

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